

Self Esteem and the Bais Yaakov Teen

In Aishes Chayil the proverbial “Woman of Valor” is extolled as one who is capable, financially savvy, caring of her family and proud of her husband’s religious status. We, as parents, would like to see our daughters grow to achieve this level. We expect them to help with younger siblings, stick to a budget, (whether it be from an allowance or from money they are making), learn to prepare Shabbos and to do it all with charm and grace (sans resentment). Yet, in order to succeed in any of the above, our girls must feel good about themselves. They must feel respected in an adult way in order for them to behave in the adult manner described above. How do we accomplish this?

The first, and simplest method to improving self-esteem is hidden in two words, “Thank you”. When we say this to our teenagers it implies, ‘I like what you’ve done; I appreciate that you’ve done it; and ‘I feel good that I can count on you’. What a bargain a “thank you” is, two words that say so much. Another simple way is leaving little notes in odd places for them. The intrigue of finding a message from a secret admirer is one that captures even an adolescent’s attention. Don’t expect a response but you can be sure that it meant something to them. While our teens are too big to cuddle up on our lap for book time, using children’s books to portray our message is a great way to tickle the funny bone, raise your teens’ moods in general and stoke their self-esteem. Leave one on their pillow at night. Again, don’t expect a verbal response (that would be expecting them to admit that they liked a kids’ book!) but you can’t imagine how important it is for a teen to get our message of love and pride as they drift off to sleep. They stay up late talking to their friends until late, (although they’re “too tired” to have a discussion with us) so why shouldn’t they hear from us at bedtime too? While I’m not paid to advertise, Amazing Savings has a large book selection and is always affordable. Look for titles with a positive message like “What I do best!” by Allia Zobel Nolan, “And Here’s to You!” By David Elliot and “Hurray for You!” by Marianne Richmond.

Dr. Abraham J. Twerski, in his book “Let Us Make Man” discusses an important difference in the view of the general world regarding teens as opposed to the Jewish view. The secular world uses the term adolescence to refer to a time period when an individual is too old to be treated like a child yet not old enough to be held accountable for his/her own actions. This creates a time period during which, as one patient described, the teen is a

“nothing”—too old for nurturance yet too young to take responsibility. Judaism teaches us that the teen, by virtue of no longer being a “Katan” (a minor) is, in fact, responsible for his/her own actions. This sense of responsibility, when nurtured effectively, yields self-esteem. Rabbi Shmuel Gluck, Director of Areivim, has published a number of insightful pamphlets aimed at helping teens and their parents with issues such as this. In Volume VI, which is geared specifically at raising teen girls, he writes that we want our girls to emulate the Aishes Chayil and so we must expect/inspire of them things “in a manner that beautifies Yiddishkeit, making it more fun and more understandable.” So far we see the importance of entrusting our teens to be responsible (recognizing the adult side) as well as the importance of having fun (recognizing the childlike side). In her book “A Happier You: A teenage girl’s recipe for self-esteem and a better life” Roiza Weinreich addresses many issues that affect our daughters’ perceptions of themselves. She adds to the elements discussed above that self-esteem is also positively affected by a girl’s willingness to branch out of her regular social group and consider befriending others. In school the girls are often limited to interactions within their own class, grade or school and they need to look beyond this, at times, and learn to reach out to others in order to help their own sense of feeling good about themselves.

How do we help our teenage girls grow into confident, responsible, socially connected young women who are proud of who they are? We know the importance of our job as parents and the impact of what we say and do but our kids don’t just exist within our four walls. They want to get and out and have fun, and here is where we see the need for community activities. Rabbi Gluck writes, “Conforming is an individual’s responsibility. However, it is the community’s responsibility to make conforming manageable.” We don’t want the girls to “hang out” at the mall, which, while fun and socially engaging is hardly the place to learn values. We don’t want our girls tempted to go to co-ed skating on Motzoei Shabbos that so many frum girls use as a release. They rationalize that it’s not mixed dancing. This too is fun, socially engaging and even has the element of exercise yet falls short of certain ideals. Going to the pizza shop on a Motzoei Shabbos focuses primarily on calories and associates socializing with food. We want the girls to be happy, healthy and active girls who are proud to be frum.

Recently, on Motzoei Shabbos there was an event for high school girls with dancing and nosh. It was the project of Rivka Resnik, Founder of a

new girls' High School called Otzar. Her aim, invite girls from ALL of the local frum High Schools to an event that would be fun and exciting, an event where the girls could feel that they were "Going out" on a Motzoie Shabbos, and "Hanging out" with friends (and even getting some exercise) yet it would all happen within the confines of an all girls, frum group. At \$10 for a three hour program it was also the bargain of the town. Girls from many of the local schools turned up including Bais Rochel, Ateres, Bais Yaakov of Monsey, Bais Yaakov D'Rav Hirsch (Breur's), Monsey Bais Chaya Mushka (Chabad) and Otzar. Even a number of girls from Lakewood drove up to join. On interviewing some of the participants I heard comments like "Nothing like I ever experienced.", "Fun", and "(I'd) do it again". Even the ultimate adolescent compliment "Awesome" was used by several of the girls. One of the girls reflected, "A lot of Achdus, different types of girls together". A young woman, who works with troubled teens said "The average Bais Yaakov girl wants to have fun." One of the mothers who came to observe the event commented: "(They are) engaging the girls. They're happy. They can let go in a healthy frum environment." This event was unique and Mrs. Resnik hopes to sponsor other events to help promote the same values of achdus, fun and frumkeit, while providing our girls with a fun, age appropriate, Motzoei Shabbos activity. Mrs. Resnik is planning another girls' night out on Motzoie Shabbos January 2.

In addition to this one event, several other programs exist in the Monsey areas that help promote these values in our girls. Prina, under the auspices of Rabbi Pinchos Jung, is a teen program that incorporates socializing, shiurim, mentoring, and hashkafic discussions in a relaxed atmosphere. The program is free and runs on Thursday nights (with cholent, of course) in the Echo building and on Monday nights in a private rec room. In the warmer months the program rents a basketball court so the girls can exercise. Being active in Bnos as a group leader is another way for the girls to meet teens from other schools and be active. A number of girls that I've spoken to help pack food for Tomchei Shabbos on Wednesday nights. This too is a joint activity of many schools and promotes achdus and socialization. If programs such as these don't exist in your area then be an active parent and start your own. Find a "cool" teacher at your daughter's school and ask her to get the girls to plan a Motzoei Shabbos event at someone's house. She can have them bake their own nosh and appoint a group to collect the most popular music. To top off the excitement, each girl should invite at least three friends from other schools. Voila, you have a fun Motzoei Shabbos without parental interference that promotes outreach and

inclusiveness. Rabbi Gluck quotes a young woman who wrote to him that “I needed you (her parents) to let me do things at my own pace and show me how you can have fun and be frum.” She adds, ”Girls need emotional happiness and satisfaction with their lives. It’s not just a ‘messed up’ girl, ALL GIRLS!!!”

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